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Music of the North American Indians

MUSIC OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

BY

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THESIS

FOR THE

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IN

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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MUSIC OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

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MUSIC OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

Introduction

(1) The Indians as a people are truthful and brave, devout in peace and in war. They are conscious of a power greater than themselves which fills their whole beings. They look upon all nature with reverence. They are at all times prayerful, and this characteristic is constantly expressed in symbol and ceremony. The ceremonial smoking of tobacco symbolizes the breath of life; the scattering of holy corn-pollen symbolizes fruitfulness and productiveness. Prayer is conveyed in the designs of their fabrics, beadwork, and pottery, in dance, ceremony and song.

Art, or the desire to create in beauty, is almost instinctive with the Indian. With him a sense of form and color is inborn. Indian children in the first grade in school can draw as well or better than white children in the fifth grade. But the art handwork of the Indian expresses only one phase of his artistic nature. The same artistic nature fashions into symbol the imagery of clouds, water, and stars. So too the music of the Indian is only another expression of his desire to create in beauty the things of everyday life.

The present-day Indians may be divided into two large classes, those of the Plains, and those of the Southwest. The

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(1) Natalie Curtis, "The Indians' Book."

Plains Indians include the Wabanakis, Winnebagos, Dakotas, Pawnees, Cheyennes, Arapahos and Ojibways. The Indians of the Southwest are the Pimas, Apaches, Navajos and the Pueblos, which include the Zunis, San Juans, Acomas, Lagunas and Hopis.

Although the Indians of the Southwest, especially the Pueblos, have a very high grade of culture on a primitive plane, excelling in pottery, weaving, basketmaking, and building, yet musically they have not advanced as far as the Plains Indians according to our standards.

Investigations were not made into the subject of Indian Music until 1880. Since that time a serious study into the work has been made by Theodore Baker (a German), Alice Fletcher, John Comfort Fillmore, Natalie Curtis, Benjamin Ives Gilman, and Frances Densmore.

We are beginning to be more familiar with Indian Music through composers who have incorporated Indian themes in their works. The foremost of these are MacDowell, Dvorak, Loomis, Kroeger, Ayers, Troyer, Busch, and Cadman.

Yet this is not Indian Music as the Indian conceives it, for he has no conception of harmony. However, the themes are Indian and serve to let us see that the Indian has a music which is worthy of our attention.

It has been the purpose of the writer to collect and arrange in concise form the principle ideas which investigators have found concerning Indian Music.

MUSIC OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

Music plays a large part in the life of the Indian, in fact it is a part of his expression. It is the voice of religious aspiration, the language with which he communes with the unseen world.(1) "Every religious, tribal, and social ceremony, as well as every personal experience finds expression in song. There is not a phase of life that does not find its subjective expression in song. Religious rituals are imbedded in it, and the reverent recognition of the creation of corn, of food-giving animals, of the powers of the air, and the fructifying sun, is passed from one generation to another in melodious measures. Song nerves the warrior to deeds of heroism and robs death of its terrors, it speeds the spirit to the land of the hereafter, and solaces those who live to mourn. Children compose ditties for their games, and young men add music to give zest to their sports. The lover sings his way to the maiden's heart, and the old man tunefully invokes those agencies which can avert disaster and death."(2)

"Music is not a diversion from the Indian point of view;

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(1) Natalie Curtis, "Folk Music of America".

(2) Century, Vol. 25, Page 425. Alice Fletcher.

it is not separated from ordinary experience by being classed as an art, but is a feature of daily, homely use and necessity. The Indian has a song for everything - his gods, his friends, and his enemies, the animals he hunts, the maiden he woos, the forest that sighs around him and the lake that glistens before him, the fire in his teepee, the whiskey that excites him, the babe in the cradle, his garments from picturesque headgear to shabby moccasins - every conceivable thing in which he has an interest becomes the subject of a song. His prayers are couched in song, and no ceremony, public or private, tribal or individual, sacred, mystical or secular, is complete without the music designed expressly for it and treasured in most instances from unknown antiquity. The Indian boy learns the legendary history of his nation coincidentally with its songs, and the vocally gifted youngsters are carefully taught by the old men and women to the end that no song of the tribe or family should be forgotten." (1) It is possibly true that the North American Indian loves music and uses it more generally than any other people the world over.

(2) Indian Songs may be classified into two general divisions: those made by man and those that come in dreams through the spirits. The first class, those made by man, are songs to

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(1) F. R. Burton, "American Primitive Song," Page 5.

(2) "Folk Music of America," Natalie Curtis.

please the ear, they rouse the feelings, stir one to do brave deeds, and make the heart strong. The songs that come from the spirits are holy, belonging to sacred rites and ceremonies. They are supposed to have power to work wonders, especially of healing. They are supposed to come from the Great Spirit, Wakan Tanka. Each song that is inspired in this manner, or "dreamed" as the Indians say, is the individual property of the man who dreamed it. He may bequeath his song to some one at his death, but otherwise the song dies with him, for no one has the right to sing a dream song of another without permission. Such a song supposedly possesses power to invoke divine aid and to protect one from evil.

(1) The characteristics of the ideas in the songs are shown in the following classification:

I. Midi Songs - songs through which it is believed that a definite result is secured by means of supernatural power. The person affected is some one other than the singer. They are characterized by (a) a rhythmic unit (a characteristic figure used more than once) which suggests a definite idea, (b) a major tonality which expresses confidence in gaining the desired end, and (c) a rapid drum beat which is always associated with controlled excitement in Indian Song.

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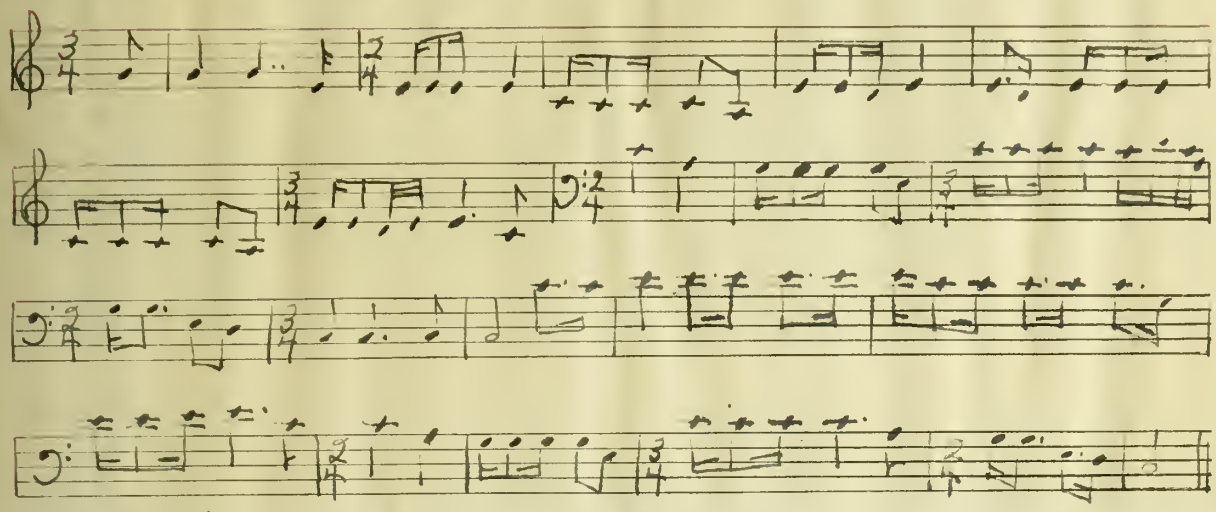
(1) Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53.

"The Thunderbirds", American Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 153.



II. Dream Songs - songs in which the motive is the securing of supernatural aid in personal undertakings. In structure they are similar to the Midi Songs.

III. War Songs of five different kinds.

1. Dream Songs of individual warriors.
2. Songs concerning war medicines.
3. Songs incidental to a war expedition.
4. Songs of success in war.
5. Wind Songs.

(1) The latter are sung for men on the warpath by those

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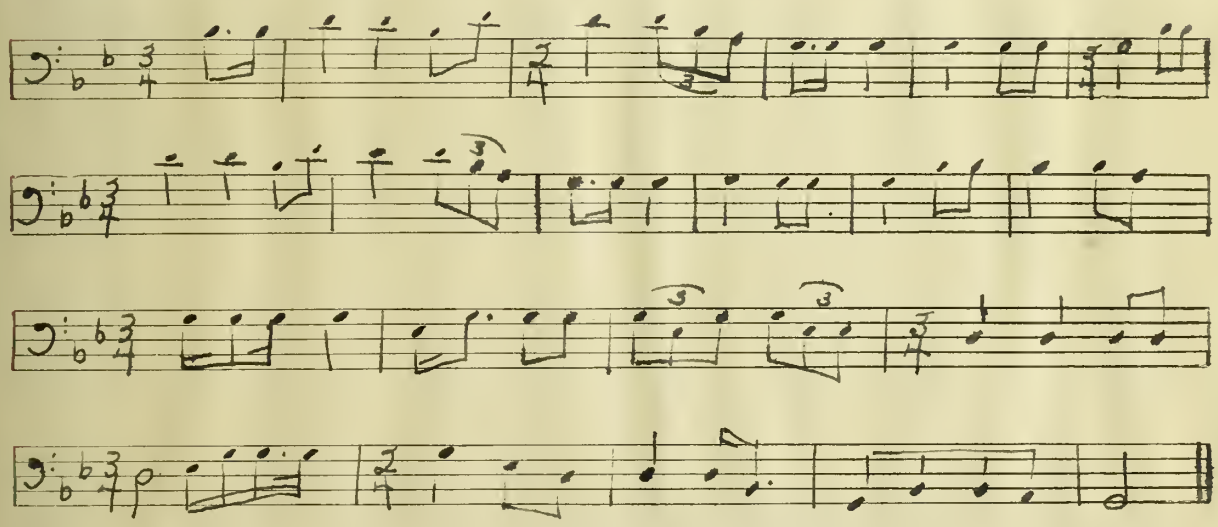
(1) Natalie Curtis, "The Indians' Book."

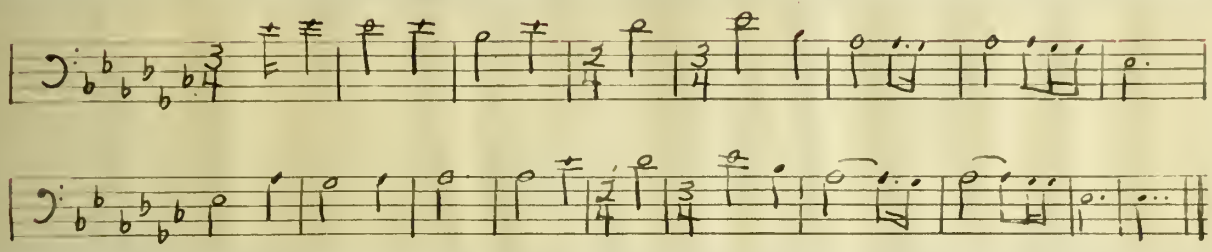
who remain at home. They are called Wind Songs because they are songs of loneliness and longing like the open prairie when there is only the sound of the wind. The melody notes of the War Songs as a whole seem to be more nearly related to a keynote than do those of any of the other songs. The songs are equally divided as to major or minor tonality. The following song is plainly in a minor key, - that of g minor. The rhythm seems to be suited to a war song.

"War Song", American Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 83.

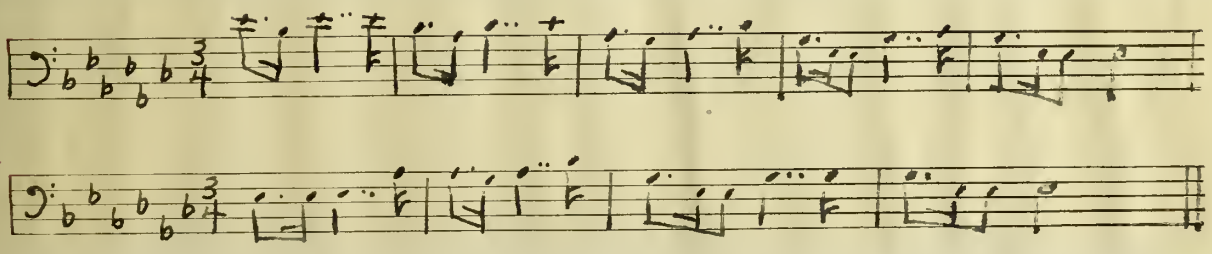


IV. Love Songs - These are usually plaintive in character, expressing loneliness, sadness, and disappointment. It is surprising that these songs which usually express sadness contain a smaller percentage of intervals of the minor third than does any other group.

"I am thinking of Her, I am sad as I think of Her"
Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 109.

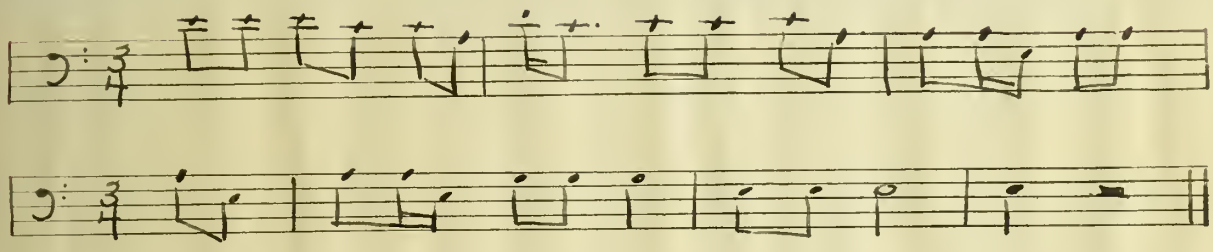


V. Moccasin Game Songs - the elements of which are controlled excitement, desire for success, gain, and pleasure, and confidence in supernatural aid. Although these songs are sung in the greatest excitement while games are being played, yet the time within the song changes less often than in other groups. In the following example, notice that the time is 3/4 throughout.
"Moccasin Game Song", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 126.



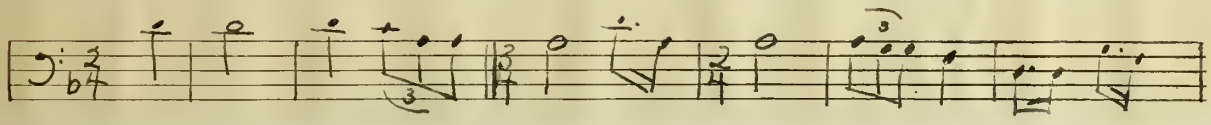
VI. Women's Dance Songs - These are songs of pleasure, the rhythm of which is particularly "catchy". They are sung at women's dances which are social affairs. An invitation to the dance is always accompanied with a gift. The songs are usually minor in tonality. The continuity of measure lengths is noticeable in this group. Triple drum rhythm occurs in all of these songs.

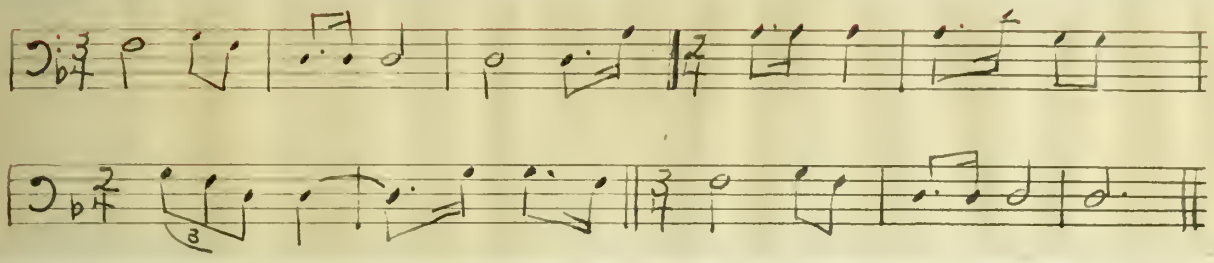
Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 45, Number 179.



VII. Begging Dance Songs - While singing these, a party goes from tent to tent, begging for and receiving suitable gifts, food or the like. Notice the interval of a fourth, which is used in songs of motion as this is.

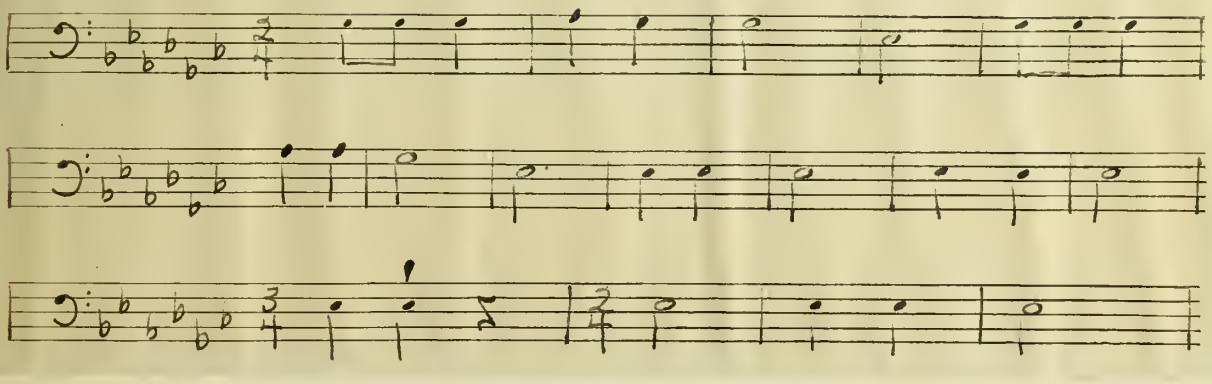
"Song of the Dogs", Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 114.

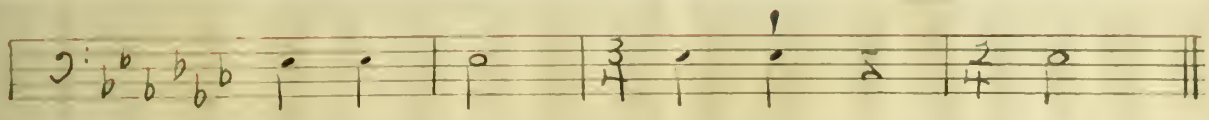




VIII. Pipe Dance Songs - The Pipe Dance was used for entertainment only. In it the dancer carried a pipe stem and his body was supposed to represent a pipe. For this reason the dancer had to keep his body in a crouched or squatting position, never standing erect. A characteristic of the music is that a short sharp beat of the drum is frequently given, followed by a pause. During this pause, the dancer stopped and remained motionless in the position he was in when the drum gave the sharp beat.

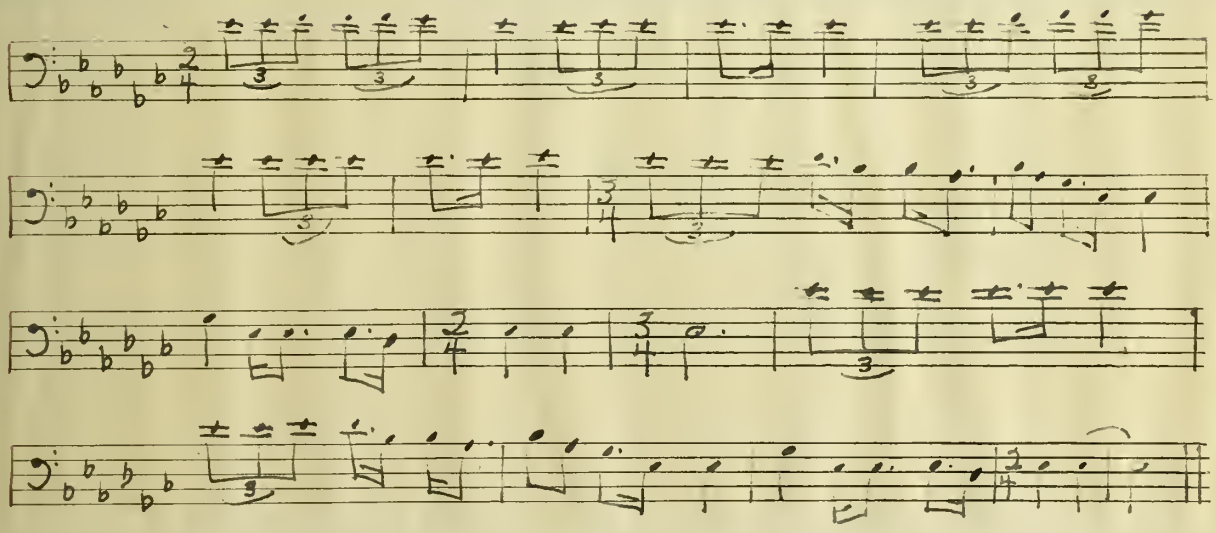
Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 171.





IX. Songs connected with gifts - These are sung whenever a valuable gift (usually a pony) is given away or received at a social dance. The average interval in these songs is 2.2 semitones. This is smaller than that of any other group. In the following example there is no skip larger than a minor third with the exception of the interval of the octave.

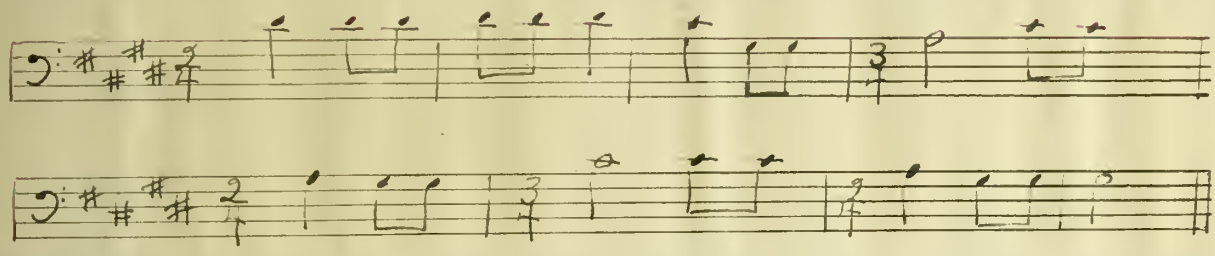
"Song of Thanks for the Gift of a Pony", American Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number124.



X. Songs for the entertainment of children - These are songs of mimic warfare, or of warfare between animals. The

illustration is a song about a coon who is represented as feigning death.

Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 180.



(1) Some tribes do not possess all of these classes of songs. For instance, a very warlike tribe may have practically no songs but War Songs. Some of the warlike tribes have no Love Songs whatever; they are found more generally in the peaceful tribes.

(2) Each ceremonial has its own appropriate songs. There are songs to be sung for birth, development to maturity, and death, besides for the numerous other religious occasions. These ceremonial songs are never sung except in the ceremonies, for they are very sacred to the Indian. They are sung carefully and

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(1) L. C. Elson, History of American Music, Ch. VI.

(2) Natalie Curtis, "The Indians' Book".

if a mistake is made, fines are exacted and the whole song must be repeated, this time correctly, otherwise the song can work no good. The Navajos sing their holy songs with bowed heads and closed eyes, that they may not be distracted. They sing as one should pray.

(1) Indian Songs travel far, but just as a Dream Song is accredited to the one who dreams it, so each tribe singing another's song gives credit to the tribe that produced it.

(2) "In all savage music, gesture and pantomine play an important part in the songs, which thus become dances." Circle dances similar to those of the ancient Egyptians, and to those of the disciples of Zoroaster have been found with the Indians. The circle dance comes from the worship of the sun, and is represented by a circular movement supposedly characteristic of the movement of the sun.

In some tribes, the Iroquois for one, women were not allowed to join in the singing of songs, but they could take part in the dancing. Pantomine is almost continuous in all of these dances and makes up for the short text. The gestures, not the words, often tell the story. In the lower tribes, the dance is

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(1) Alice Fletcher, Century 24:421.

(2) L. C. Elson, History of American Music, Ch. 6, Folk Music, Page 234.

the more prominent part of the song.

(1) The text in Indian Song is of less importance than the melody. There is only one idea in a song, and it is expressed very compactly. It is really only the idea that is expressed. So little other than the idea is expressed that one listening to a song without an explanation of it often can not make sense out of the words. For example, the words of one song are "Warm door in Winter, door, warm door." Because the words apparently say nothing, the singer tells the story and then sings the song for it. The story that goes with these words is about a man lost in a blizzard, who, when his strength was about exhausted, heard the beat of a drum. He then knew that he was near the hut of some Indian, but whether friendly or hostile, he could not tell. When he reached the hut he was still undecided whether to enter or die in the storm, but just then he heard the Indian within singing this song of hospitality, so he knew the Indian would be his friend. Thus the words "door in winter" are only a hint of the story of the song. (2) "A single word will call up a scene, describe an act, which to give equal force in English would require

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(1) "Chippewa Music", Harper's Weekly, 55:21, Ja.'14, 1911.
(2) Nation 71:31, "Indian Song", Alice Fletcher.

a whole sentence." [1]The Indians say of our songs that we talk a great deal when we sing. Some songs have no words, but meaningless syllables are used instead, syllables as ha, hae, hi, hu, and yoh.

[2]To the Indian, music and poetry are one. Music is a vehicle to express the idea of the poetry. Every different set of words makes a "new song" even if it is sung to an old tune. Words are the pegs on which to hang the tunes. Chippewa verse especially is condensed. A long wedding song says only these words, "A girl has been given to me, yes, I am glad she has been given to me." The rest of the song is filled with "hey ahs" and meaningless syllables. An American song on the same subject would probably be treated to some extent, telling of the girl's beauty, charm, grace and purity.

Authorities differ in opinion as to the basis of the structure of Indian song. [3]One says that the Indian does not think of tones as steps in a scale, but as constituents in a familiar sequence of tones unrolling itself before the memory.

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[1]Century 25:421.

[2]"Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

[3]Science, October 15, 1916, "The Science of Exotic Music", Gilman.

The songs are made of [1]"material out of which scales are elaborated, and are not compositions undertaken in conformity with intervals fixed in the minds of the singers." This is probably the correct view of the matter for no Indian can sing a scale unless he has learned it from us.

[2]Another goes farther and says that although the Indian has no theories, that his music is handed down by tradition and is the spontaneous result of the desire to express emotion in song, yet it is built on a scale of five tones. The tones omitted are those which would give half tone progressions. [3]The Ojibways, the tribe with which music is the most highly developed, have developed melody according to taste, not to the science of a scale. The intervals of our major diatonic scale are recognized, but the fourth and seventh rarely occur in the same song. The point of rest is not on "do", showing that the value of the seventh is not appreciated. It is never the last step before the conclusion; it is used as a passing tone. For this reason, that the fourth and seventh rarely occur in the same song, it is sometimes considered that a pentatonic scale is used. According to this, the major scale would be in a downward progression - for that is the way the Indian sings - sol, mi, re, do, la, sol. The minor scale cor-

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[1]"Primitive Music", F. R. Burton, from Gilman.

[2] Journal American Folklore, 8:138, J. C. Fillmore.

[3]"Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

responding to it would be mi, re, do, la, sol, mi. In this the final tone is more often "la" than "mi". It resembles our melodic minor scale somewhat.

(1) The tones are the same in all of the pentatonic scales, the only difference being in the keynote. The intervals of the scale will be seen to be the same as the intervals between the black keys on a piano. Supposing the tones represented by the black keys to be the same tones as those used by the Indian, the first pentatonic scale would have c# as the keynote, the second would have d#, the third f#, the fourth g#, and the fifth a#.

(2) In support of the belief that Indian Song is founded on a pentatonic scale, a number of melodies were harmonized with tones found only in the melodies. As most of the songs had only five different tones present, the harmonies used only five tones. These harmonies seemed satisfactory to the Indians, whereas if other tones were used in the harmonies, the Indians said they did not sound right.

(3) Songs which have been recorded on a phonograph and then played to a specially tuned instrument called a harmonical, show startling results. The instrument records graphically the wave lengths of the tones used in the song. If a scale of measurement

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(1) Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Page 4.

(2) Journal American Folklore, 8:138, J. C. Fillmore.

(3) "Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

for recording the wave lengths were made which divided the interval of a whole tone into fourteen subdivisions, it was found that the tones of the Indian Songs more often fell into these sub-divisions rather than on the principle tones of the scale. That is, instead of singing the tones of our diatonic scale, the Indians sing these tones a little flat or sharp. This proved to be the case so often that it seemed as though a conscious effort had been made to sing in these pitches, avoiding the tones of the diatonic scale. Perhaps they would have been unable to direct their voices to the tones of the diatonic scale had they desired. The flaw in the harmonical test is that instead of experimenting on seventeen different songs, one song should have been tried a number of times to see if variations in pitch always occurred in the same places.

On the other hand the majority of singers in an environment where music is studied as an art do not always sing on pitch. It is not rare that a chorus or solo voice flats or sharps almost a semitone. If the exact wave lengths were recorded and a person unfamiliar with our scale should see the graph, he might judge that our scale was made up of more than seven tones.

However, we can so nearly represent Indian Songs on our staff, that we may call them diatonic. The Indians of the Southwest sing more noticeably in fractional tone intervals than do the Indians of the Plains. This may be due to the fact that the Indians of the Southwest have not been in contact with the music of our civilization as long as have the Indians of the Plains.

Or possibly their voices may be so trained that they can not control them or direct them to other intervals.

However, the Indians of the Plains are in far greater numbers; so we may still call Indian music diatonic. Another reason for calling it diatonic is that two Indians singing the same song do not make variations in pitch at the same places.

(1) The comment has been made that Indian music shows the effect of civilization. Perhaps it does, yet it is still Indian. If there has been any change in the music it has been made by the Indians themselves, or indirectly through the white people. But the Indian has probably made these changes unconsciously. Since the white man came to America they may have cut out some of the appoggiaturas or in some cases made the music periodic, yet it is Indian music.

The Iroquois nation undoubtedly shows the effect of contact with civilization. The younger generation uses a different tonality from the older. There is an interval of a half tone between the seventh and eighth tones as in our scale. The following is an Iroquois melody as sung by the older men, and as sung by the younger ones. In both cases the melody is periodic. In the latter case, notice the absence of grace notes and the semitone between

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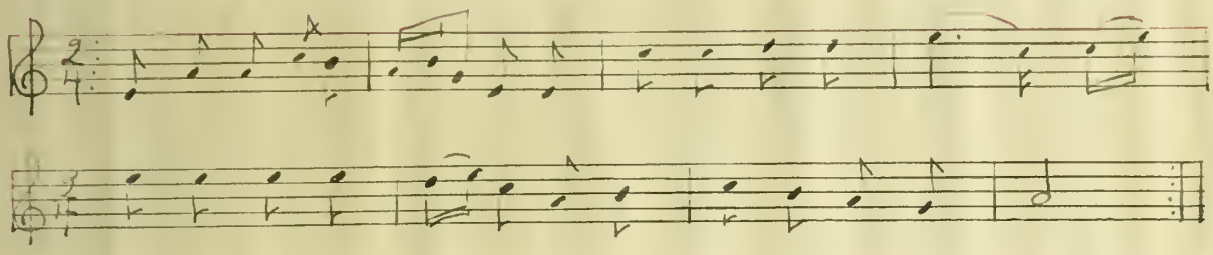
(1) "Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

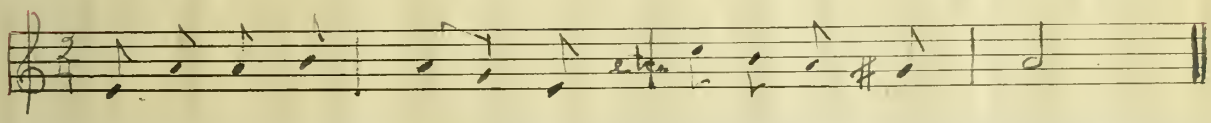
seven and eight.

"American Primitive Music", F. R. Burton, Pages 74, 75.

Older Form.



Newer Form.



The rhythm of Indian Song is very complicated. A measure of two-four is often inserted in a series of three-four, or a measure of five-four, into a series of four-four, as

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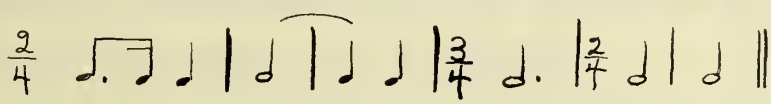

(1) Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Page 219.

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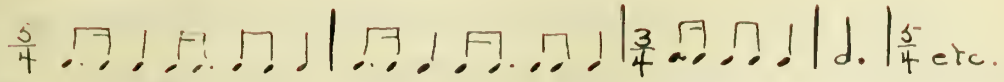
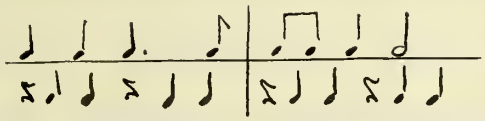


(2) Frequently a song is sung with five beats to the measure throughout with the exception of inserted measures in other rhythms, for example, a measure with only four beats, or three beats. This may be due to the numeral system in which they count up to five and then the compounds begin.

The drum and voice rhythms vary, both going on simultaneously as:



(3) They are very precise as to time and seem to feel both rhythms. (4) This is also true in the Hindu System of music, in which the drum and voice rhythms seem almost unrelated according to our ears. (5) This, together with the fact that archaeologists have found instruments in New Mexico which resemble those discovered in Nineveh and other parts of ancient Assyria, suggests an idea as to the origin of American Indian music.

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(1) Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Page 209.

(2) "Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

(3) Century 25:421, A. Fletcher.

(4) "A Short Account of the Hindu System of Music", Page 31; Anna Wilson.

(5) "History of American Music", Ch. 6; L. C. Elson.

[1] Syncopation is absolutely essential to the Indian. A short note is often used on the first drum beat of the measure.

[2] According to Groove's Dictionary, rhythm is the orderly arrangement of groups of accents. In our music the notes of the accompaniment are in orderly proportion with regard to time duration to those of the voice. "In Indian music there is often no possibility of orderly proportion, so that there appears to be and often is a concurrence of rhythmic schemes that are in conflict. It this conflict could be maintained with steadiness in each part indefinitely, it would be incontestable that the Indian is capable of conceiving unrelated rhythms at the same time." But in singing against the drum, the pulses of drum and voice do not always come together at the same places. From this we infer that the singer sings as he chooses. [3] When the drum beats three times against two beats of the voice, the singer keeps time; but when the conflict is greater than two against three, the singer does not keep his measures in order. His sense of rhythm is so much like ours that the drum disturbs him in the rhythm he is trying to sing. The drummer beats with steadiness, only varying the beat when a change of step or tempo takes place.

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[1] "Craftsman", 21:415; Natalie Curtis.

[2] "Primitive Music", Page 51; F. R. Burton.

[3] "Primitive Music", Page 58; F. R. Burton.

(1) The Ojibway is not held by drum rhythm as some other tribes are. He does not know the conflict between voice and drum, but keeps on drumming because he has never sung without the drum. If this is the explanation of the Indians' rhythm, we see whereas it appears complicated, yet it is not as advanced as ours, for the highest development is the most orderly. In our own music we know that in its early stages there was no method of denoting rhythm or duration of time. When a system was reached in which these could be expressed, music took a more definite shape and had possibilities which it had not had before. If the Indian had a strict sense of rhythm, he would modify the accents of the drum to fit the accents of the voice. The Ojibway singer shows this advancement by interrupting the drum beats, trying to bring its accents with those of the song. He is advanced enough to try to adjust the accompaniment to the melody, rather than to sacrifice the melody for the accompaniment.

In all Ojibway songs other than ceremonials, the drum beats come with the vocal accents. This is probably not done in ceremonials because they are so old, and also anything connected with a ceremonial is not subject to much change.

Knowing something of the scale or tone relation which

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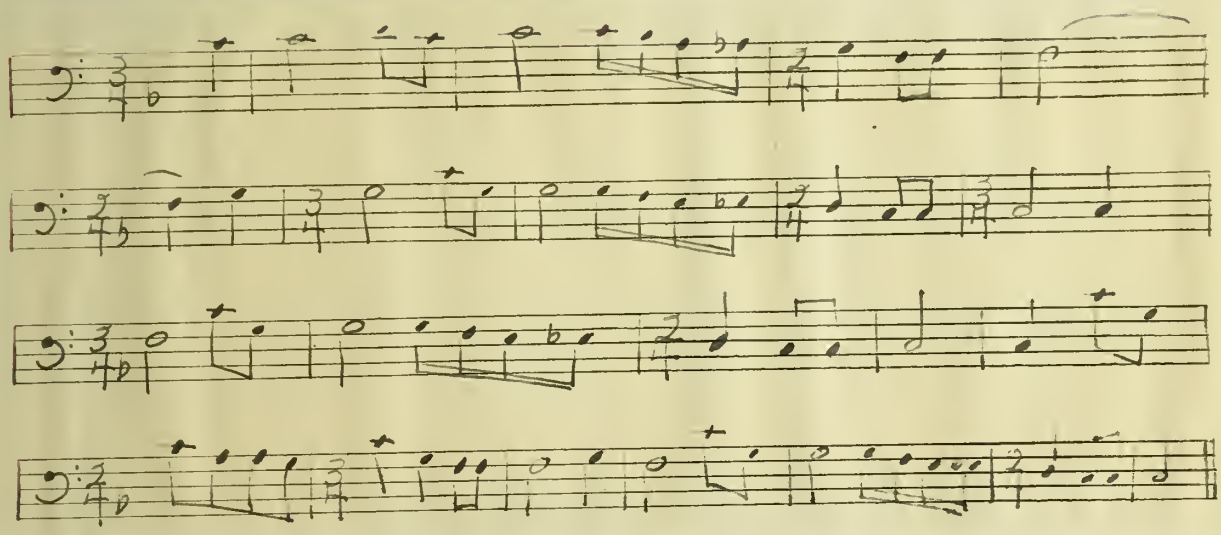
(1) "Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

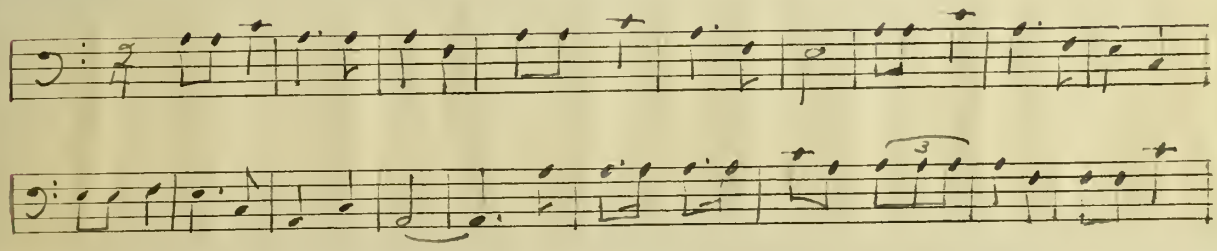
underlies Indian Song and something of the rhythms into which the songs are cast, it is well to consider some of the characteristics of the songs themselves.

In all of the songs figure-repetition is prominent. The following examples were taken at random from Bulletin 53 of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Notice the repetition of figure.

"Go With Me", American Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 105.

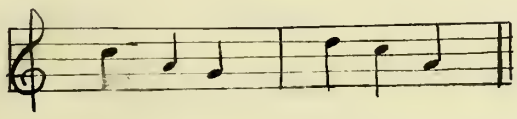


"Gift Song", American Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 53, Number 37.



(1) Although a song is sung in a minor tonality, there is often a major ending. Non-harmonic tones are used freely (see example one). The songs usually start with some kind of an introduction; it may be a monotone or a melody. It is sometimes brief, or it may be as long as the song. Words or only a vowel may be sung to it.

Often a song starting out melodiously does not continue so. It lapses into conventional phrases and leads to a conventional ending. The progression of a minor third either followed or preceded by a major second is used commonly by all tribes. It may be regarded



as the Indians' leading motive. It is because of the frequency of this progression that the songs are often called monotonous.

There is a tendency for the singer to begin a song as high as he can sound a tone. He descends gradually to the end

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(1) "Primitive Music", F. R. Burton.

tone, which is usually an octave or more below. This downward progression is naturally sung with a diminuendo of the voice, which makes it resemble the sounds of nature.

(1) The eight-measure period so common in our music occurs only rarely in Indian Song. The six-measure period divided into two phrases of three measures each is as common as any. (See the "Gift Song"). Occasionally a five-measure period is used.

(2) Some of the song characteristics can not be recorded on paper. Strange gutteral sounds are used and strikingly vibrating tones. In singing long sustained tones, the hand is moved to and from the mouth to produce vibrations. Slurs and accents are used freely which make Indian Song so distinctive.

The following statements are made after studying three hundred and forty Chippewa Songs as tabulated by Frances Densmore.(3)

The largest number of songs in any one key is eleven per cent. This is the key of G major. The next largest number in any one key is six per cent, and that is in the key of A major.

Seventy-seven per cent of the songs have a change of time within them.

In forty-three per cent each beat of the drum is preceded by an unaccented beat corresponding to the third count of a

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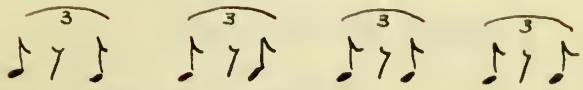
(1) "The Indians' Book", Natalie Curtis.

(2) "The Indians' Book", Natalie Curtis.

(3) Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53.

triplet, as 

A rhythmic unit is "a group of tones of various lengths, comprising more than one count of a measure, occurring at least twice in a song and having an evident influence on the rhythm of the entire song".[1]

SONGS CONTAINING A RHYTHMIC UNIT.

Number of songs having one rhythmic unit	62%
Number of songs having two rhythmic units	2%
Number of songs having no rhythmic units	37%

METRIC UNIT OF VOICE AND DRUM.

Number of songs in which the metric unit of voice and drum are the same	36%
Number of songs in which the drum is faster than the voice	46%
Number of songs in which the drum is slower than the voice	18%

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(1) Bulletin of American Ethnology, Number 53, Page 31.

TONALITY OF SONGS.

Number of songs in major tonality	57%
Number of songs in minor tonality	42%

DEGREE OF SCALE ON WHICH THE SONGS BEGIN AND END

Number of songs in which the first tone is the twelfth tone above the keynote	33%
Number of songs in which the first tone is the fifth tone above the keynote (For purposes of analysis the twelfth and fifth tones are the same)	21%
Number in which the first tone is an octave above the keynote	15%
Number in which the beginnings are about equally divided on other tones	31%
Number in which the last tone is the keynote	67%
Number in which the last tone is the fifth tone above the keynote	22%
Number in which the last tone is the third tone above the keynote	11%
Number in which the last tone is the lowest tone in the song	90%

ACCIDENTALS

Number of songs which contain no accidentals	85%

In discussing structure, the songs are classified as:

(1) Harmonic, if contiguous accented tones bear a simple chord relation to each other, that is, if consecutive accented tones could be members of the same triad or seventh chord as C, E, G, B.

(2) As purely melodic, if contiguous accented tones do not bear a simple chord relation to each other, as F, E^b, C, B^b. That is, they are not members of the same triad or seventh chord.

(3) As melodic with harmonic framework, if only a portion of contiguous accented tones bear a chord relation to each other.

Number of songs which have harmonic structure	24%
Number which are purely melodic	66%
Number which are melodic with harmonic framework	10%

PROGRESSIONS

As to the first progressions in the songs:

Number in which it is downward	70%
Number in which it is upward	30%

Of the total number of progressions:

Number downward	65%
Number upward	35%

The intervals in the downward progressions are:

A second	42%
A minor third	34%

A major third	11%
A fourth	8%
A fifth	1%

The upward progressions are practically in the same proportion.

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